

African Culture and the West

II—Western Cultural Engagement in Africa

ROLAND HINDMARSH

Within the last seven years Britain has shed political responsibility for most of the areas she formerly governed, and France for all. With the waning and extinction of political power over Africa by former colonial countries, would it not be appropriate to disengage culturally as well?

The case is arguable. To survey the cultural confusion and desolation left in the wake of the withdrawing colonial powers is a deeply disturbing experience. It disturbs not merely the thoughtful Westerner, but, much more profoundly and lastingly, the sensitive African. Chinua Achebe shows the beginnings of disintegration in *Things Fall Apart*. Ferdinand Oyono in *Le Vieux Nègre et la Médaille* and *Une Vie de Boy* shows the growing cultural disorientation. Achebe, again, in *No Longer at Ease* and Cyprian Ekwensi in *People of the City* take the process a stage further into the cultural confusion and jumbled values of urban living in modern Africa. Surely the tale of harm is long enough; it is time to withdraw, with bowed heads. It is the West that is in need, of cultural and spiritual regeneration. Why send our disenchantment, our aridity overseas? Let us put our own house in order. If any African wishes to come and make his own gleanings amongst us, let him be welcome, but let him be warned that the pickings are thin.

But the snug haven of withdrawal is no longer open today. Suzerainty has gone but interdependence between states has taken its place. No country can withdraw into political isolation. Britain is still politically involved in Africa, and Africa in Britain, and the involvement will increase. Cultural withdrawal makes even less sense than the spurious neutrality of political disengagement. Cultural interrelationships will grow closer, and will provide the setting and much of the matter of political interdependence. Cultural engagement in each other is inevitable; let it therefore rest on understanding and judgement, and proceed with modesty and a readiness to learn.

The purpose of the first of these articles¹ was to sketch out some of

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the main features of the African cultural setting today, as a pointer towards the information which the West should be seeking. This article will discuss Western cultural engagement in Africa, both actual and possible.

Engagement must be effected with something; what does the West bring of itself to Africa? How is the selection of area and matter in the field of Western culture made? On what principles does the selection rest? How far is the selection partisan? To what extent are the various areas of culture accepted in Africa, and to what extent are they rejected?

It is worth while looking briefly at the legacy from history of the Western cultural impact on Africa, since some of this is likely to affect present choices. Earlier Western trading on African shores was usually non-cultural, and sometimes anti-cultural: a negative legacy of minimal importance today. The exercise of political control, as over the Congo kingdoms in the sixteenth century, disrupted culture much more severely; the argument from law and order advanced by Western governments seemed to Africans then as transparent a piece of chicanery as it indeed was. The first Western cultural influence of any real positive power was, in most areas, Christianity. It came powerfully, causing cleavage within a tribe, a clan, a family, an individual. But it offered a means of healing for the cuts it made. After an uneasy period of transition, sometimes marked by riots, uprisings and civil war, Christianity became an accepted way of living for some members of what had once been a culturally homogeneous community. Accepted; established; conventional; and now—the pattern is disquietingly familiar—largely a matter of social or family conformity.

Why should this outflow of Christendom from the West have ended in sterility so soon? There are saints in Africa, of course; there are men and women living according to Christ under conditions of appalling difficulty. But the Catholic Church in Africa, taking the Church as the people of God, is, perhaps not sterile, but at any rate cocooned. Surely, if the West had anything of profound cultural value to offer, it was Christianity? Perhaps the failure here, as in much else the West has attempted culturally in Africa, is to be found partly in the West's lack of self-awareness.

What was the true inspiration that drove nineteenth-century missionaries into the deserts of North Africa, the mangrove deltas of Nigeria, the swamp-pocked plateaux of Uganda; into certain disease and probable death. Was it really a desire to bring the life of Christ to others, humbly, beginning with small beginnings? Or was it, in its

essential conception, a kind of spiritual colonialism? For some, no doubt, it was and remained primarily the former: for Charles de Foucauld. Others may have begun with some sense of this humility of approach. But, for them, as for the majority, the missionary endeavour in Africa soon took on the manner and strategy of a colonial occupation. The central drive from Europe; the organization and financing; the carving up of Africa into mission fields (with clashes and bickerings between different missions about extent and demarcation of territories); the establishment of mission stations; a hierarchy of authority stretching back to Rome, where initiatives even in minor matters had to be referred for suspicious scrutiny, temporizing decisions and, as a rule, ultimate rejection.

The missionaries brought out to Africa what they had in Europe: an organization rather than a living Church. The organization derived a sense of stability from buildings: churches, presbyteries, schools, hospitals. So build it must in Africa. The energy put into building by the missions focuses attention on their fascination for material achievement: a thoroughly nineteenth century trait. It also silhouettes the barrenness of their spiritual witness. Their inspiration was not that of the English monks in Germany and Scandinavia in the ninth and tenth centuries. Nor was it the light that guided the Jesuits in Paraguay many centuries later. It was territorial expansionism, under the flag of contending churches and, sometimes, contending missions within the Catholic Church. Even the lack of a programme for social regeneration with a Christian moral pattern points to the nineteenth century sociology of *laissez-faire*. The central issues of how to love God and one's neighbour were avoided; all the more energy was put into the periphery of administrative and secular functions. It is no wonder that most African priests and practising Catholics today cling to a rigid orthodoxy in their spiritual lives; apart from sacramentally, the nature of living communion with Christ has never been shown to them. Nor is it any coincidence that the preaching of the doctrine of the Mystical Body for the first time in East Africa in the 1950s packed the churches with, for once, attentive, eager congregations; until the presentation of even this became only an arid exercise for the preacher, without adequate translation into psychological approachability for the individual or social reality for the group.

The missionary movement out from the West that began in the nineteenth century was well intentioned, but romantic and naive. It did not understand the true springs of its own action, nor did it think

through clearly the aims to be achieved, much less relate them to the culture into which it was moving. This weakness at the centre of its thinking has been its undoing.

In the field of education, a similar lack of awareness about motives has prevailed; also an eclecticism of aims. Education was seen as the area in which Africans would meet, and be trained in, Western culture; but what should the features of that culture be? The best we have to offer, said some, ingenuously hoping to submerge the real problem in a euphorian flow of cultural largesse. The best the West has, adapted to their needs, said others, begging a different question. The humanist tradition of learning and manners, said others, with greater semblance of coherence; revealing at the same time the seeds of cultural domination. Give them a free choice, said the liberal, speaking from the imagined unimpregnability of relativism. Make their education strictly practical, said the pragmatist. All these conceptions of what culture the West should give, display, nurture or impose in Africa have been and still are in play, sometimes even in the mind of one man. The spread of culture through the schools has produced in Africa the same pattern of disarray in education as exists in the West, where traditionalism, woolly thinking and inept radicalism have resulted in a monstrous confusion of premises, motives and aims. The disarray in Africa is perhaps not as variegated as in the West, since there has not been the time to develop all the permutations, nor the personnel to make all the idiosyncratic interpretations. But the disarray is deeper in that the confused values of Western culture have been introduced to a non-Western society itself in disintegration and transition.

Christianity; education; government. This is the third major cultural area in which the West deemed itself to have a mission. The main aim was clearer here: the creation of a civilized, modern society or state on Western lines. This required machinery: the machinery of civil administration; the machinery of communications; the machinery of industry. This was something the Victorians understood and which in the twentieth century continued to grow in Western Europe. Of the cultural impacts of the West on Africa, this has been the most successful in achieving what it set out to do. The machinery of organization and material power is something all African governments have accepted completely. In the ideological field, however, there is much less confidence in the West. Democratic government has not survived in some now independent African countries; a more authoritarian form of rule, ironically closer to Portuguese or South African systems than to the

British, seems to be winning increasing favour. Yet the national state has certainly come to stay; tribal government has been superseded, and pan-Africanism, understood as excluding much of North Africa, is a living desire.

Science, technology, industry; these are fields where the West will continue to be engaged in Africa, by African demand. Commerce and administration are areas of partnership, under overall African management and direction. All of these fields are para-cultural in that they derive from cultural values properly belonging to other areas. Education is a cultural area in its own right, and African countries will for many decades still require Western engagement here; but the African conception of education is functional. The purpose of educating members of a nation is to fit them to serve the new machinery of government and technology. Education is basically vocational. It was vocational in tribal society too, but then vocation was not disjoined from the ethical code and spiritual beliefs of the tribe. Western culture has no coherent ethos or religious view; the new education should therefore concentrate on what is consistent in the Western message—the organization of power.

Western ideas and Western values have not been accepted; nor have they been rejected. The incoherence of their presentation; their mutual contradictions; the whole unsorted congestion of ideas; the confusion of premise, aim, method, metaphysic, belief, hypothesis; and the tangle of unconscious presuppositions underlying it all; all these make either acceptance or rejection impossible. Western culture lacks system and meaning. System would give it coherence; meaning would put it in a living setting, in a situation where its validity, in human terms, could properly be assessed.

Some thinkers, reaching this point, again counsel withdrawal. Such advice is vainly given. The world is so much one that all nations are involved in the twentieth century problem of too much material power and too little understanding of human and spiritual values. The West has succeeded in delivering its technological message to Africa. It has failed to convey what it has of human and spiritual values convincingly. This failure is only part of a general cultural malaise, the first cure for which lies in self-awareness. The pursuit of self-awareness is itself a cultural activity, and should be carried out in company with other non-Western nations, who are, in a different way, as culturally disoriented as the West.

To increase awareness of self is a painful and humiliating exercise. It uncovers motives which we would rather leave undeclared. In the

search for this kind of truth, Africa and the West may help each other towards self-discovery. The West has much to learn from the way in which Africans see us; our portraits appear initially as caricatures, until, like the paintings of Picasso, they suddenly burst through our flattering self-images as chilling reality. Self-awareness does not precede Western engagement in Africa; it is part of it. Being informed about ourselves, and hence about our own culture, is the corollary to being informed about the African cultural setting.

It is important not to preconceive the terms in which we are to understand culture. What we are often pleased to understand as Western culture is in the main an act of gross self-deception. We think of great works of literature, of art, architecture, music; call them our Western heritage; pretend that these are the sources of our inspiration. An unprejudiced phenomenology of Western culture reveals many other values, which we would like to deny as non-cultural, but which are nevertheless powerful factors in determining our orientation to the outer and inner worlds. Sociological studies, when sufficiently profoundly conceived, are significant pieces of cultural description; realism of this kind is essential in the pursuit of self-awareness.

The areas of cultural engagement in Africa are therefore the areas of cultural engagement with ourselves. The first principles of selection are those of truth and relevance, not to Africa, but to ourselves and hence, since the world is one, to Africa as well. Is our search for human and spiritual values to be guided by a vaguely humanistic eclecticism? By the neutrality of a comprehensive approach in the manner of a scientific survey? By a method of comparative study, using an assortment of unsifted, unrelated criteria? By a pragmatic, verificationist approach, in the shallow pretence that there are no metaphysical issues involved? Educational programmes, both here and in Africa, show that principles of selection are heterogeneous and often self-contradictory. The West is engaged in education in Africa: in training courses for African students in the United Kingdom; in training Westerners who are going out to work in African education; but most significantly in determining the matter of education at the secondary school and university levels in Africa.

Some of this educational engagement is vocational in a strict sense: training in the exercise of a particular trade or skill in industry or commerce. The conception here is pragmatic, and hence para-cultural. But in professional training, and in areas centering in human and spiritual values, there is need for a new conception. This has begun at the primary school level in the attempt to try to relate the matter of primary

education to the child's real cultural situation. Teacher-training colleges are therefore involved, as well as the training of teacher-trainers which is seen by the British Council as a principal field of Western cultural engagement overseas. Yet in primary education we are still thinking of learning facts and skills rather than learning to be. Value comes in by the way; it is not central or generative. Society is not seen organically as a body in which the individual grows into fuller being, but in terms of an imperfect amalgam of competitive individualism and state control.

Secondary education brings in some study of value through literature, history and, in some cases, religious instruction. What of Western culture is offered here? The literature syllabuses for examinations, controlled by committees sitting in the United Kingdom, with mainly ineffective advice from African sub-committees, have an enormous backwash effect on the literature curricula of the whole course of secondary education. Syllabuses at G.C.E. O-level almost always have a Shakespeare play, and a choice of from two to four works from eighteenth century comedy, nineteenth century verse, the Victorian novel, and a book of travel or biography written in this century. There is variety enough in the literary genres represented, but the choice of authors and periods reveals the influence of fusty canons of taste and of a historical view of literature study. It is also extraordinarily insular, normally allowing in no writers who were not born or adopted into the United Kingdom. Translations, however literary, are not admitted to the syllabus, except in the travel and biography section. This cuts out almost all American and Commonwealth writers; and all translations of major European authors, or overseas authors writing in European languages, especially French. The conceptions underlying such a syllabus date from the heyday of cultural colonialism. Tucked away from public attention in this country, they have survived the winds of change almost unruffled. Only where African countries have themselves taken over control of their own syllabuses has any effective modernization taken place.

Most African leaders today have suffered this introduction, among others, to Western cultural values. The syllabus has moments of enjoyment: especially in Shakespeare, sometimes in Dickens. But when Mukasa has read his *Macbeth*, his *The Rivals*, his *Great Expectations* and his Matthew Arnold or Tennyson, he is likely to feel that Western culture is even more bewildering an enigma than before. To present the pupil with great ideas, with dramatic situations, with profound descrip-

tions of character; that may have been the aim. But can values be thrown at an adolescent in this haphazard way, in the hope that he will be able to pick out the bits that will fit together into a mosaic of his own making? If literature is one of the main fields in which value is integral, how can the pupil resolve the incompatibility of Shakespearean ethic with the flimsy moral pastiche of Sheridan or the sententious rumblings of Arnold? For it is a matter of resolution; the pupil is searching to fit together a system of values in a world where value has disintegrated.

The history syllabuses don't help either. There are four choices, probably, from British history; a syllabus on African history for which textbooks and supporting material are still inadequate; and a syllabus called 'History of the British Empire and Commonwealth', ironically the most popular of all, because the topic is easy to circumscribe, repetitive in pattern, and amply provided with textbooks, model answers and cribs. There is also a curious hotch-potch called British Constitutional History, involving also the history of ancient times (Greeks and Romans only, of course) and voyages of exploration (exclusively European). Here is another cultural backwater, barely stirred by the turbulent flow of the twentieth century.

If literature and history fail to provide a setting in which the world of value can be coherently explored, perhaps at least religious instruction may do this? In Catholic secondary schools in Africa the teaching of religion suffers from formalism, lack of continuity, and the complete lack of any suitable published material. There are missals and prayer books; there may even be course-books on religious instruction in some schools. But the missals and prayer books need enlightened commentary to turn them into items of value for a secondary school pupil trying to learn to worship as an adult in a language not his own, since his vernacular will not encompass adult conceptions in theology; while the course books are written for Western secondary school pupils, whose religious difficulties proceed from a very different social and psychological background.

The situation is clearly bad, and demands drastic remedies. This can come from a new conception of culture which works on two levels. The first level is universal: the world is one and fundamental human problems are very much alike everywhere since they proceed from our common humanity. The second level is one of engagement; it recognizes that individuals and social groups have to grow towards each other from the matrix from which they have sprung, the modes and dynamic of which will have non-universal characteristics. This new

conception points towards a greater sharing of the experience of our humanity with each other.

Western cultural engagement in Africa needs renewal under this conception. In the political field, there is still too little appreciation of the social presuppositions of democratic government, and much too little realization of the appropriateness of other forms of rule in situations arising from different matrices. What British-staffed university, for example, will give an adequate account of the fittingness of Russian communism in the Russian situation; or of the social and psychological factors in South American countries which make revolutionary coups a valid way of changing rulers. At the universal level, the work and aims of the United Nations, unequal though it is, should receive much greater stress in those areas where fundamental human problems are concerned. This does not feature regularly in education programmes, because there are no degrees in universal human needs, seen from the point of view of human beings; nor, at the secondary level, is there an examination subject in the approach to world government.

Educational syllabuses should reflect universality not merely in politics and government, but also and especially in the field of human and spiritual values. Spiritual, it may be argued, is a doubtful term; so it is, to the materialist West. But the world of spirit is real enough outside, though some of it is temporarily obliterated by the mental dust stirred up in the struggle for material power. Man is not, in spite of American college text books, 'a mass of protoplasm moving about on the face of the earth'. Let the centre of study be again man, not matter. Let there be a new constellation of subjects called 'human studies'. Let this not dribble away into accounts of man's material achievement, but let it take the central values of the human spirit as its focus, and begin to present an anthropocentric cosmos; theocentricity will result. Let literature syllabuses, if old nomenclatures are to be preserved, draw widely from all works in all languages which deal with the fundamental values in man. Let history give up extolling past nationalisms and point instead towards a future by showing the inevitability of shared human experience, in which the many matrices of culture, past and present, all participate.

At the level of engagement, even more needs to be done. The West's role in Africa is to see secondary and university education with new eyes; to understand that the African matrix is not that of the West, but equally that it does not desire to become a new nationalism or even continentalism so much as to grow into a new world. This growth must be from its own matrix. Literature syllabuses must work outwards

from the pupil's psychological and social centre; broadening, not dislocating, his experience of inner and outer worlds. African authors in the first place, then West Indian and Indian, will speak more directly to his enlarging vision than will authors from Western countries. These, carefully selected to present a graded picture and in keeping with the new conception of culture, may come later. This does not mean that works of literature will be put on a cultural index; merely that their study will not be recommended until the pupil is in a position to assess their quality and importance against a scale of values which he has been building up. The importance of works in translation will be greatly enhanced, for English and French are not merely the vehicles for literature in English and French; they are, for African students, the vehicles for all the cultures of the world—a fact tragically ignored by many educationists and most examination bodies. The assessment of the quality of translations will be a criterion which may decide the inclusion or exclusion of many important works; and where are our university chairs of literature in translation? Where indeed are our selective programmes of translation into English of major classical and current works in European, let alone Asiatic languages?

At the level of engagement, history is still in the doldrums. There is growing agreement that Europe-centred historical writing about world history is no longer valuable; but too little work has been done on the writings (translation lacking again) of non-European historians. Historical writing in Arabic from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries is reputed to be much greater, even in bulk of remaining documents, than the European equivalent. Yet this has lain for centuries, ignored. New historical writing, appropriate in style and conception to the matrix it takes as its focus, is needed. There is no need to ape the nationalistic histories of European countries, now only slowly being superseded by descriptions less false and less obnoxious to traditional foes.

The preparation of suitable syllabuses of religious instruction and suitable textual and study material presents the greatest challenge of all. Here is a field, cultural in the profoundest sense, where the transmission attempted by the Church has, by and large, failed. The failure was due to confusions in aim and motive, and to the consequent avoidance of cultural issues in the Christian living. Syllabuses and study material need to be prepared in relation to a given matrix; but they should be part of a much deeper attempt to present Christianity in an organic setting where a life of community can take root and grow into coherence and meaning.